

The meaning of faith

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A sermon given on Sunday 7th August 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-18

Year C, Proper 14

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 1:1 NRSV)

I wish I had your faith!

Have you ever said to someone or thought that when you heard a preacher or learnt about a great act of faith on the part of a Christian you know or someone you heard about?

Sometimes these words have been said to me, and I think to myself, I really don't think this comment is justified. What do you actually know about what goes on in my head? How can you compare your faith to mine? We're all different, and what might take a huge amount of faith for one person might not be a big deal for another.

A person might be great at speaking eloquently about God, but surely the proof of the pudding is in how they actually behave. As James wrote in his letter, "faith without works is dead".

So let's not buy into the idea that you can compare your faith with someone else's. It's usually leads to you feeling more inadequate about your identity as a disciple of Christ, and can be an excuse for opting out of the challenge of trusting in God and obeying what he wants you to do. The important question is not how much faith we have, but what we do with it. When Jesus' disciples asked him "Lord, increase our faith", he told them that if they had faith as small as a mustard seed they could still move mountains. It's not how much faith you have that matters, it's what you do with it.

So what is faith?

Today's New Testament reading comes from a letter addressed to people who struggle with faith just like you and me. We don't know much about them, but they seem to have been Jewish Christians who had been facing persecution and were tempted to go back to Judaism. In the first 10 chapters, the writer gives several arguments to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish religion. We won't go into these now. But here in chapters 11 and 12 of Hebrews the writer seeks to give us encouragement. Chapter 11 is one of the key biblical passages about faith. Faith gives us a dimension to our lives that enables us to look to the future with hope and face the challenges of life with courage.

In verse 1 he defines faith:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 1:1 NRSV)

Well, that's clearly understood then, isn't it? Or is it? Actually this seems like a bit of a contradiction in terms. How can you have conviction, certainty or assurance about something you can't see and can only hope for? I think the writer realises that this one statement on its own isn't going to do it for most of his readers. So he then spends the rest of the chapter giving examples of different aspects and applications of faith. Verses 4-7, which are omitted in the lectionary reading, give Abel, Enoch and Noah as examples of people who showed their faith in God by worshipping him, by walking closely with him and by obeying him. And then he moves on to the example of Abraham, who showed his faith in several challenging situations.

Faith isn't the same as certainty. If you have certainty, then you don't need faith. Faith is what you need *when you don't have certainty*. And at the present time, with all the uncertainty in our

economy, and with the challenges of terrorism and political uncertainty over Brexit we find ourselves in a world where faith in something is clearly needed. As a church we are facing the challenges of falling attendance and falling finances. We are certainly going to need faith in God to find our way forward. And maybe in your own life you are facing uncertainty and insecurity.

Moving out of your comfort zone (8-10)

Abraham is the next example of obedience. He trusted God enough to leave behind what was secure and familiar – his life in the city of Haran - to go where God told him to – living in tents in the land of Canaan. Some people think that being a Christian is all about feeling safe and having greater certainty. That wasn't what Jesus offered the fishermen, or the tax collectors, or the Pharisees. On our journey of faith God may ask us to step out in faith and try something new – either in church or in the rest of our lives – take on a new responsibility in church or at work, change job, start or finish a relationship. As a church we need to be willing to move on with God and not think that we have a right to carry on doing exactly the same things that we have always done. Abraham looked to the future and embraced it. What future does God hold out for us to embrace? Are we willing to step outside our comfort zone in order to discover the purposes that God has for us as individuals, or as a church?

In September and October we will be looking at the theme of Mission in the church, and in particular asking how can we become a mission-shaped church? It may require some changes in the way we do things. There will be more about this in the September newsletter.

Trust (11-12)

Abraham and Sarah had to trust God's promise that they would have descendants, even though it didn't seem very likely – and they had to wait! Sometimes we just can't see how God is going to bring anything good out of our situation. But faith is willing to wait. It trusts that God will work something out. Mark Stibbe puts it this way: "The world says, 'I'll believe it when I see it'. The Christian says, 'I'll see it when I believe it'. Our faith is instrumental in the impossible happening.

This doesn't mean that faith needs to be blind or irrational. In Hebrews 11 verse 3 the writer says that

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Believe in God as creator is not incompatible with science. Plenty of scientists are Christians. Faith starts with evidence but is prepared to go beyond.

Let's take a very different example. You remember the story in Matthew's gospel about Jesus walking on water? In chapter 14, Matthew tells us that Peter, seeing Jesus walking on water asks Jesus if he can try it too. He had the evidence of Jesus doing it, plus Jesus' invitation; faith meant looking to Jesus, trusting him and then getting out of the boat. Faith means being willing to take a risk. It's not enough just to believe in your head; faith is when you get out of the boat. But don't start off well and then bottle out. While Peter was looking at Jesus, he was walking on the water. When he took his eyes off Jesus and started looking at the wind and the waves, his courage left him and he began to sink. So the key to continuing well in the Christian life is – *keep your eyes on Jesus*. If we keep close to him by giving him our attention, praying to him, walking with him every day, we will find that we can do all kinds of things we never thought we could.

There are good reasons why we can trust God to deliver. In particular, we can look back to all the ways he has provided for us, protected us, guided us in the past. I'm sure if you look back over your life you can see God's hand at work. Don't try to explain it away, but give God the credit where he deserves it. Over the years I have seen God answering prayers and meeting needs. There are many people whom God has brought along to us just when we needed them to play a particular part in the life of our church. Some of them are sitting in this church today (but I won't

embarrass them by giving their names). God can be trusted. He never calls us to do something without providing the resources that he knows we need to carry out the task.

So let me offer a definition of faith that sums up everything I have been saying: *faith is an attitude of trust that leads to action*. Faith and faithfulness are connected – the clue is that being faithful is about being full of faith. But in the Bible, the same word in Greek (*pistis*) can be translated either as faith or as faithfulness, according to the context. Faithfulness is the way you behave when you put your faith into action.

Looking ahead (13-16)

In the last few verses of today's reading, the writer asks what all these people had in common, and what seems to sum it all up is this – they all looked ahead to the future, rather than thinking the best was in the past. They had an attitude of trust in God for the future, and instead of being complacent about what they had, or being fearful about losing it, or wanting to go back to what they had before (15), they strained ahead to what God has promised. As Christians we are on a journey to our promised land – an eternity with God in the heavenly city which he has prepared. It's because we know where we're going that we have the confidence to trust God for the future, and to take bold steps to put our faith into practice day by day.

Conclusion

So the message for us is: faith is an attitude of trust in God that leads to action. It's an attitude that makes us available for God to use. And it's not how much faith you have that matters, it's what you do with it.

So don't compare your faith with that of other people. Rather, listen to what God is saying to you and put your faith into action. Keep your eyes on Jesus, spend time with him and he will guide you and empower you so that you follow God's plan for your life and do his will. May he give us the courage to step out boldly in faith, both as individuals and as a church, so that with him we can accomplish far more than we ever thought we could, to his praise and glory. Amen.